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Book Tells of U.S. Data on Downing of Korean Jet

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 4 — The Soviet Union shot down a South Korean airliner at a time when American intelligence had a vast array of listening devices directed at that area of East Asia, including installations in Japan unknown to the Japanese Government, according to a new book.

The book, "The Target Is Destroyed," says intercepted communications gathered by these listening devices were not available to intelligence officials until hours and days after the attack on Sept. 1, 1983, too late to save the lives of the 269 people aboard the airliner. The plane had strayed hundreds of miles off course and into Soviet airspace, where it flew over sensitive military installations.

The book, by Seymour M. Hersh, is based on two years of research and includes interviews in the United States, the Soviet Union and Japan. Soviet officials are quoted as saying they spoke with Mr. Hersh because they wanted him to prove that the plane's off-course flight path was part of an intelligence mission for the United States.

Mr. Hersh says he found no evidence that the plane was part of any American intelligence operation.

But he contends that both the Soviet air defense system and American intelligence were victimized by errors of judgment and flaws in equipment. The book's minute-by-minute account of how American intelligence monitored the incident is one of the most detailed descriptions to date of the workings of this country's intelligence systems.

According to the book, American intelligence chiefs and top policy makers immediately concluded, on the basis of incomplete transcripts and evidence, that the Soviet Union had knowingly fired on a passenger plane. The book says the senior officials ignored an initial assessment by Air Force intelligence that the attack was based on a succession of Soviet blunders, including a failure to identify the plane.

That view of the incident, the book says, was eventually endorsed by the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, but the Administration never set the record straight.

The book quotes the head of Air Force intelligence at the time, Maj. Gen. James C. Pfautz, as saying: "We did the best job we could in a very short time and then we turned it over to the policy makers — and they disgusted me. It was very, very clumsily handled."

A White House spokesman would not comment directly on the book's assertions that the Administration ignored relevant intelligence data. He said, "Conjecture that the Soviets fired on the aircraft before possibly identifying it neither explains nor excuses the fact that the Soviet Union shot down a civilian airliner, killing all 269 people aboard."

The book says the first indications that something unusual was going on among the Soviet air defense forces was picked up by an American listening post at the Elmendorf Air Force Base near Anchorage.

Operators listened as the Soviet radar operators reported the path of an unidentified plane as it neared the Kamchatka Peninsula. They heard as the Soviet forces sent four planes aloft. The technicians speculated that they were watching a routine exercise.

According to the book, the Air Force unit did not file any report on the 70-minute chase, which ended when the unidentified target re-entered international airspace. This was cited by the National Security Agency's later review of the incident as a flaw in the intelligence reporting, the book says.

The Korean jetliner's off-course path took it next over the highly sensitive military installations on Sakhalin Island in the Soviet Union, and this time, the Soviet interceptors were able to come within range of their target.

Listening in as the pilots conferred with ground control was a secret American base at Wakkanai, Japan, that had been set up without knowledge of senior Japanese officials. The installation was studying whether it would be useful to put an American listening post there. The 30 Americans there worked under cover and did not wear military uniforms. Some sympathetic Japanese officials were told of the American presence; others were not.